

Chapter 10

The Investiture Controversy (1075-1122)

From about 1050 to 1300, a series of German popes, who had been influenced by the monastic reform movements of the tenth and early eleventh centuries, sought to purge the church of major abuses. Two of the most important abuses that had led to moral debasement of the clergy and the withdrawal of laymen from the organized church were simony (the purchase of church offices through money or illicit obligations) and the marriage or concubinage of clergy. The particular issue, however, that touched off a period of strained church-and-state relations was that of investiture.

A long-established practice allowed lay magnates such as feudal lords, kings, and, most importantly, Holy Roman emperors to govern their territory with the help of bishops and archbishops, known as prelates. The prelates were generally educated, loyal, able administrators who provided a necessary link between the noble or king and his dependents. The kings chose and rewarded the prelates, and by the eleventh century also "invested" them with ring and staff, the symbols of episcopal power, sometimes with the words "receive thy church." The recent reform movement of the internal affairs of the church naturally lent itself to a redefinition of the church's position on lay magnates. The reformers came to challenge this practice of "lay investiture," arguing that the choice and investment of prelates was rightly a spiritual matter. In so doing, they challenged the basis of effective rule and royal authority.

The controversy came to a head when a young monk named Hildebrand succeeded to the papacy amid popular acclamation. He had established a reputation as an ardent and respected reformer and took the name Gregory VII (1073-1085). His main antagonist was the aggressive Holy Roman emperor, Henry IV (1056-1106). The two soon quarreled over the issue of investiture, and Gregory did not hesitate to use his "spiritual sword," which included the extreme penalty of excommunication from the sacraments of the church and, as a result, eternal damnation in Hell. In the succeeding test of wills, the supremacy of church or state was hotly disputed.

In a spiritual age, does the abstract control over one's soul demand more respect and allegiance than the tangible military power of the secular leader? The investiture dispute was but one incident among several between church and state that were vigorously pursued at the time. The contest for primacy continued until the fourteenth century, when events like the transfer of the papacy from Rome to Avignon (the Babylonian Captivity) and the division of the church (the Great Schism) led to a crisis in spiritual leadership. And yet, this basic controversy continues in the modern world whenever prayer in school is discussed and the concept of separation between church and state is debated. The investiture controversy makes us aware of the historical roots of this problem.

Pope Gregory VII's decrees against lay investiture were in effect a declaration of papal primacy over the secular power of the Holy Roman emperor. However, they did not deter Henry from supporting his own candidate for the bishopric of Milan against the pope's choice. This led

1 to a brisk and inflammatory correspondence between the two. Henry deposed Gregory as pope,
2 and Gregory countered by deposing Henry as Holy Roman emperor. In addition, Gregory
3 excommunicated Henry from the church, which had political as well as religious implications:
4 Henry's nobles were thereby freed from their oaths of allegiance to him.

6
7 *The Excommunication of Emperor Henry IV (February 1076)*¹
8 POPE GREGORY VII
9

10 Saint Peter, prince of the apostles, incline your ear to me, I beseech thee, and hear me, thy
11 servant, whom you have nourished from my infancy and have delivered from my enemies that
12 hate me for my fidelity to thee It is not by my efforts, but by thy grace, that I am set to rule
13 over the Christian world which was specially entrusted to thee by Christ. It is by thy grace and as
14 thy representative God had given to me the power to bind and to lose in heaven and earth.
15 Confident of my integrity and authority, I now declare in the name of omnipotent god, the
16 Father, Son, and Holy spirit, that Henry, son of the emperor Henry, is deprived of his kingdom of
17 Germany and Italy; I do this by thy authority and in defense of the honor of thy church, because
18 he has rebelled against it. He who attempts to destroy the honor of the church should be deprived
19 of such honor as he may have held. He has refused to obey as a Christian should, he has not
20 returned to God from whom he had wandered, he has had dealings with excommunicated
21 persons, he has done many iniquities, he has despised the warnings which I sent to him for his
22 salvation, he has cut himself off from thy church, and has attempted to rend it asunder; therefore,
23 by thy authority, I place him under the curse. It is in thy name that I curse him, that all people
24 may know that thou art Peter, and upon thy rock the son of the living God has built his church;
25 and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

27
28 In joining battle with Gregory, Henry had misjudged his opponent. Although most of the
29 German bishops (whom Henry had appointed) supported him, his nobles, already restless, took
30 the opportunity to rebel against their excommunicated king. Under such pressure, Henry
31 promised to respect the pope and finally humbled himself before Gregory at the papal retreat
32 high in the mountains at Canossa. There, Gregory granted him absolution, as recorded in a letter
33 to the German nobles dated January 28, 1077. Henry's oath at Canossa follows.

35
36 *"Go to Canossa!" Henry's Penance (January 28, 1077)*²
37 POPE GREGORY VII
38

39 In the meantime we learned that the king was approaching. Now before he entered Italy
40 he had sent to us and had offered to make complete satisfaction for his fault, promising to reform
41 and henceforth to obey us in all things, provided we would give him our absolution and blessing.
42 We hesitated for some time, taking occasion in the course of the negotiations to reprove him

¹ Oliver Thatcher and Edgar McNeal, eds., *A Source Book of Medieval History*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), pp. 155-156

² Oliver Thatcher and Edgar McNeal, eds., *A Source Book of Medieval History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), pp. 158-159.

1 sharply for' his former sins. Finally, he came in person to Canossa, where we were staying,
2 bringing with him only a small retinue and manifesting no hostile intentions. Once arrived, he
3 presented himself at the gate of the castle, barefoot and clad only in wretched woolen garments,
4 beseeching us with tears to grant him absolution and forgiveness. This he continued to do for
5 three days, until all those about us were moved to compassion at his plight and interceded for
6 him with tears and prayers. Indeed, they marveled at our hardness of heart, some even
7 complaining that our action savored rather of heartless tyranny than of chastening severity. At
8 length his persistent declarations of repentance and the supplications of all who were there with
9 us overcame our reluctance, and we removed the excommunication from him and received him
10 again into the bosom of the holy mother church Now that this arrangement has been reached
11 to the common advantage of the church and the empire, we purpose coming to visit you in your
12 own land [Germany] as soon as possible. For, as you will perceive from the conditions stated in
13 the oath, the matter is not to be regarded as settled until we have held consultation with you.
14 Therefore we urge your action. We have not bound our self to anything, except that we assured
15 the king that he might depend upon us to aid him in everything that looked to his salvation and
16 honor.

17
18 *Oath at Canossa (January 1077)*³
19 EMPEROR HENRY IV
20

21 I, Henry, king, promise to satisfy the grievances which my archbishops, bishops, dukes,
22 counts, and other princes of Germany or their followers may have against me, within the time set
23 by Pope Gregory and in accordance with his conditions. If I am prevented by any sufficient
24 cause from doing this within that time, I will do it as soon after that as I may. Further, if Pope
25 Gregory shall desire to visit Germany or any other land, on his journey to that place, his sojourn
26 there, and his return afterwards, he shall not be molested or placed in danger of captivity by me
27 or by anyone whom I can control. This shall apply to his escort and retinue and to all who come
28 and go in his service. Moreover, I will never enter into any plan for hindering or molesting him,
29 but will aid him in good faith and to the best of my ability if anyone else opposes him.
30

31
32 After Henry's oath of allegiance to the pope in 1077, he attempted to reestablish authority
33 among his nobles in Germany who had in the meantime supported a rival named Rudolf. After
34 three years of civil war, Gregory finally decided to support Rudolf and for a second time deposed
35 and excommunicated Henry. Gregory's attempt at "king-making" was badly timed. Henry's
36 influence was growing, and in December 1080 he defeated and killed Rudolf. Henry's
37 momentum could not be halted, and he soon denounced Gregory and invaded Italy, finally
38 occupying Rome in 1084 and besieging the pope in the fortress of Saint Angelo. Although
39 Gregory was rescued by his allies, he died in 1085, convinced that he had failed in all his
40 endeavors. For the rest of his reign, Henry was harassed by rebellious German nobles. He never
41 succeeded in establishing the strong, stable monarchy that his father had enjoyed. His own son
42 was leading a rebellion against him when Henry died in 1106. A solution to the lay investiture
43 problem was not to be found between Gregory VII and Henry IV. Not until 1122 in the
44 Concordat of Worms did Pope Calixtus II and Henry V arrive at a compromise: The church

³ Oliver Thatcher and Edgar McNeal, eds., *A Source Book of Medieval History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), p. 160.

1 would nominate and elect prelates and then invest them with the ring and staff, symbols of
2 spiritual authority. The emperor thus formally renounced his power to so invest prelates. In
3 exchange, the pope recognized the emperor's right to be present during the election of prelates,
4 and in a disputed election the emperor's decision was to be final. The emperor was also allowed
5 to invest a prelate with the "regalia" of his office (lands, worldly goods, and privileges). With the
6 Concordat of Worms, the investiture struggle ended in a workable compromise, though it did not
7 satisfy extremists in either camp. The dispute may have been resolved, but the struggle between
8 church and state, empire and papacy was to be renewed with even greater violence in the
9 thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

10
11 **CONSIDER THIS:**

- 12 • Both Emperor Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII opposed each other with actions as well
13 as with words. What weapons did the pope have at his disposal to combat the emperor,
14 and in turn, how could the emperor combat the pope?
- 15 • What were the weaknesses and strengths of each arsenal?
- 16 • From the evidence at hand, analyze the personalities of Gregory and Henry. Were these
17 men similar in temperament? Why were Henry and Gregory unable to reach an
18 agreement along the lines of the later Concordat of Worms?
- 19 • From your study of the investiture controversy, which is the stronger power-the church or
20 the state? By their very nature, must they oppose each other?
- 21 • Is complete separation of church and state a solution to the problem of supremacy? Do
22 you see any modern ramifications to this problem?